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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 003946

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: CATHOLIC CHURCH CHANGES TACK AND TAKES MORE
RESTRAINED APPROACH ON POLITICAL ISSUES

REF: A. MANILA 3697

- [1](#)B. VATICAN 0500
- [1](#)C. MANILA 3202
- [1](#)D. MANILA 3167
- [1](#)E. MANILA 2815

Classified By: Acting Pol/C Joseph L. Novak
for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines is changing tack in regard to its political role. Under the leadership of the now-deceased Cardinal Sin, the Church assumed an activist posture, pressing for the ouster of two presidents, and at times indicating preferences for or against candidates for political office. With Sin gone, the Church -- in line with Vatican teaching -- has taken steps to try to remove itself from a direct political role. This was the case, for example, when the Catholic bishops declined to demand President Arroyo's resignation in July. There are still elements of the Church -- particularly a group of leftist bishops -- that are urging that it take a more active political role. In regard to social issues, such as GRP involvement in family planning, the Church continues to hew to a conservative line close to Vatican teaching, as was the case during the Sin era. Although the Church is refining its role, it is clear that it plans to remain engaged and that it will become more active if it feels some sort of national crisis warrants its involvement. End Summary.

End of the Sin Era

[1](#)2. (C) The Catholic Church in the Philippines is changing its posture in regard to its political role. Under Jaime Cardinal Sin, the Church took an activist role. (Note: Sin became Archbishop of Manila in 1974 and retired from office in 2001. He died in June 2005 -- see ref e. End Note.) Sin, for example, played a key role in pressing for the ouster of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 and Joseph Estrada in 2001 by urging crowds to join "People Power" protests and in other ways. Speaking for the Church, he also at times indicated preferences for political candidates: not a fan of Fidel Ramos, he basically indicated his desire that voters not support Ramos in the 1992 presidential race. When Ramos won, Sin was not at all helpful to Malacanang and successfully opposed a proposal floated by Ramos supporters that the Constitution be adjusted to allow more than one presidential term. He was also uncomfortable with Estrada's candidacy in 1998 and made it clear that he would prefer other candidates to win the race, including current House Speaker Jose "Joe" de Venecia. Sin was vocal on many other matters, such as peace in Mindanao, education, family planning (see para 8), etc. Asked about Sin's activist posture, Alex Magno, a well-known political commentator, told Acting Pol/C that "Sin seemed to have an opinion on everything under the sun and he spoke out almost every day on something."

A More Restrained Posture

[1](#)3. (C) With Sin gone, the Church has taken steps to try to remove itself from a direct political role. Observers have remarked on a "Sin effect" whereby members of the current hierarchy of the Church have viscerally reacted to his departure by pulling the Church back from overt involvement in political issues. In part, this reaction is due to the resentment that many in the hierarchy felt towards Sin and the immense role he played in Church affairs for almost 30 years. In addition, many of the leaders of the Church today, such as Ricardo Cardinal Vidal, Manila Archbishop Gaudencio Rosales, and Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) President Archbishop Fernando Capalla, have made clear in discussions with emboffs that they simply do not believe that the Church should be directly involved in politics. While noting his respect for Sin, for example, Archbishop Capalla has told Acting Pol/C that he thinks "Sin went too far into politics on occasion to the detriment of the Church."

[1](#)4. (SBU) This reluctance to get fully involved in politics

was shown most clearly on July 10 when the CBCP during its annual meeting issued a statement on the ongoing political turbulence sparked by Opposition demands that Arroyo resign from office. In its carefully crafted statement, the CBCP made clear that Arroyo had to be held accountable for her actions. However, despite great pressure from close allies of the Church like former president Corazon Aquino, the Church declined to call for her resignation (see ref d). Some observers have commented that the CBCP statement would probably have taken a different stance if Sin had been involved in its drafting (Sin was very close to Corazon Aquino and may have been swayed by her). Many observers also believe that if the CBCP had called for Arroyo's resignation, she would have been finished. Due largely to the CBCP's non-interventionist posture, Arroyo has been able to recover her balance and survive in office.

15. (C) Another of the reasons for the Church's current posture relates to Vatican teaching. During Pope John Paul II's reign, the Vatican repeatedly underscored that members of the Church should not get involved in politics and Sin was reportedly told at times by Vatican officials that he had gone too far. More recently, Monsignor Adolfo Franco, the Papal Nuncio, addressed the bishops gathered at the CBCP's annual meeting in July. Franco reportedly made clear to the group that it should keep out of politics to the full extent possible (refs b and c). CBCP General Secretary Hernando Coronel told us that he did not think that Franco's speech "pressured" the bishops per se, but remarked that the bishop's heard his point loud and clear.

A Clutch of Politically-Active Bishops

16. (C) There are elements of the Church that are urging that it take a more active political role. Bishop Deogracias Iniquez, Bishop Antonio Tobias, Bishop Julio Labayen and several other bishops (possibly 5-8 of the total of 90) are known to be close to the left. Most of these bishops come from poor areas and they advocate poverty alleviation programs at every opportunity. They are also anti-"Globalization" and oppose mining by foreign firms and plans to raise the Value Added Tax (VAT). Led by Iniquez, these bishops also demanded the resignation of Arroyo earlier this year. Another group in the Church that has a bit of a leftist tilt is the Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines (AMRSP), which represents priests and nuns involved in social work and human rights issues, among other matters. AMRSP as a group came out in July in support of calls for Arroyo to resign. Overall, however, the Church has moved a long way from the 1960s-80s when many priests and nuns and some bishops maintained close links with the Communist Party of the Philippines/New People's Army (CPP/NPA). Some even went into the jungle to join the NPA. Taking a cue from the Vatican, the Church in the Philippines as a whole strongly condemned "Liberation Theology," an interpretation of Catholic teaching that advocates political and social activism, and the influence of leftist thinking gradually has ebbed in Church circles.

17. (C) Although he is not left-leaning per se, Archbishop Oscar Cruz, one of 16 archbishops, has been very engaged in anti-jueteng (illegal gambling) efforts. Cruz testified in the recent Senate hearings on jueteng and has brought forward witnesses who he says prove his case about jueteng-related corruption. Cruz has also made no secret about his view that members of President Arroyo's immediate family have been involved in jueteng profiteering. While he would deny it, Cruz is also known to be close to Opposition circles who want Arroyo to resign.

No Change on Social Issues

18. (SBU) In regard to social issues, the Church continues to hew to a conservative stance in line with Vatican teaching. In this area, there has been no change from the Sin era. The Church continues to oppose abortion, which is illegal in the Philippines, and divorce, which is not available as a legal option. In regard to family planning, the Church supports what it calls "natural family planning," (such as the "standard days" method) and breast feeding. The Church continues to urge the government not to make family planning a high priority and it opposes any use of taxpayer money to fund family planning efforts. Along these lines, the Church has strongly opposed a Department of Health program launched in early 2005 called "Ligtas Buntis," which involved distribution of information on family planning nationally. The program also provides contraceptives to those who want them. The Church has also strongly opposed a bill (H.B. 3773) submitted in the House that advocates adoption of a comprehensive policy on population management. The bill seeks to provide government funds for mobile family planning services that would provide contraceptives upon request. The

Committee on Women gave the bill a favorable recommendation in early 2005. The House has not acted on the bill and it seems that it will not, at least in the near term, due to strong Church opposition and the current focus on impeachment charges (ref a). President Arroyo, who has been lobbied by the Church, has not endorsed the bill.

Comment

19. (C) To some extent, the determination of the Church to take a less activist role is a return to the situation that existed before Cardinal Sin came on the scene and became involved in political issues in the 1970s-90s. Before that timeframe, and throughout the post-war era, the Church had not taken an activist posture on political issues. Although the Church is refining its role, it remains a very important player on the political scene, albeit in an indirect manner. As was made clear at the time of the CBCP statement, Filipinos look to the Church for guidance -- and the fact that the CBCP did not call for Arroyo's resignation pretty much doomed the Opposition's efforts to undermine her at that time. In the near- to mid-term, it is clear that the Church plans to remain engaged and that it will become more active if it feels some sort of national crisis warrants its involvement. It will remain under countervailing pressure, however, from the Vatican and from elements inside the Church itself to maintain a focus on spiritual and doctrinal matters, and not entwine itself too much in political issues.

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